

Perspective Transformation Over Time: A Two-year Follow-up Study of HIV-Positive Adults

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Abstract: This study investigated the stability of a perspective transformation over time. The findings confirmed that perspective transformations, at least in our sample, are irreversible; we also discovered that meaning schemes continue to change.

Although Mezirow (1978) first proposed his theory of perspective transformation over twenty years ago, it has only been within the last decade that the field has witnessed a burgeoning of both empirical research and philosophical critique on the theory. In a recent article, for example, Taylor (1997) reviewed some 39 empirical studies using Mezirow's transformative learning as the theoretical framework. The focus of most of these 39 studies was on the process of transformational learning, either in its entirety, or with respect to a particular component of the process. Taylor notes that while there is "much support for Mezirow's theory," there is also a need "to recognize to a greater degree . . . (the) broadening of the definitional outcome of a perspective transformation," (abstract).

It is the outcome of a perspective transformation that most interests us, not in terms of what might be an outcome, but rather what happens to the perspective transformation over time. The purpose of this study was to explore just that question by re-interviewing, two years later, the 18 HIV-positive adults who were participants in our original study of the centrality of meaning-making in transformational learning (Courtenay, Merriam, & Reeves, 1998).

What the Literature Suggests

With regard to the stability of a perspective transformation, Mezirow (1991) is quite clear that once a transformation has taken place, there is no going back to an earlier position: "The transformative learning process is irreversible once completed; that is, once our understanding is clarified and we have committed ourselves fully to taking the action it suggests, we do not regress to levels of less understanding" (p. 152). Kegan (1994) characterizes cognitive development in much the same way. Cognitive development is not merely additive, but "transformative, qualitative, and incorporative. Each successive principle subsumes or encompasses the prior principle . . . The new principle is a higher order principle (more complex, more inclusive) that makes the prior principle into an element or tool of its system" (p. 33). Only one study was found that included a follow-up of participants' perspective transformations. Williams (1986) studied the role of transformational learning in changing the behavior of male spouse abusers. At the end of a 12-week intervention program designed to change the men's perspectives and their behaviors, the degree of perspective transformation was assessed using an evaluation form and an exit interview. He interviewed six of the 19 participants three months

later and found that for four of the six, perspective transformation ratings were slightly higher. However, little information was given about the nature of these perspective transformations or how they were measured.

It would seem from the theoretical literature that once one has committed to a transformed perspective, it would not be possible to revert to a less developed state. That is not to say, however, that one has reached an end state; rather, development is a continuous process (Brew, 1993; Daloz, 1986; Kegan, 1994; Mezirow, 1990a, 1991; Tennant, 1993). Further, this development is more than change over time -- it is change in a positive direction, toward a more complex, integrated, inclusive, and tolerant perspective. Indeed, Mezirow (1990a) equates changes in meaning perspectives with stages of moral, ethical, and ego development; "Each stage . . . involves a developmentally advanced and progressively more functional meaning perspective" (p. 359). Daloz concurs, stating that the "later stages are by definition more conceptually inclusive and discriminating, are 'better' in some sense than earlier ones" (p. 137).

Thus, we conducted follow-up interviews to determine if perspective transformations had endured for our original sample. We also wanted to know whether or not our participants had adjusted, modified, or changed particular meaning schemes, and/or accumulated a number of changed meaning schemes such that another perspective transformation has occurred.

Data Collection and Analysis

As in the original study, a qualitative design was deemed most appropriate to discover how participants' perspectives may have changed over time. Of the original 18 participants in our first study, we were able to interview 14 (8 men and 6 women). All respondents, except one 59 year-old male, ranged in age from 25 to 47. Eight of the 14 are Caucasian, five are African American, and one is Hispanic. Level of educational attainment spanned grade 10 to Master's degree. Ten were currently employed and 10 of the 14 reported being on protease inhibitors. Respondents were given \$30 to participate in interviews of approximately 90 minutes in length.

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews. The focus of the interview questions was to assess what changes had taken place in their perspectives with the passage of time, and with the introduction of protease inhibitors. Interviews were held in January and February of 1998, more than two years after the 1995 interviews. All were tape recorded and transcribed. Data from the transcripts were analyzed inductively using the constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Each member of the research team individually read, re-read, and coded the transcripts for key points regarding our questions. The research team met regularly to compare each member's analysis of individual transcripts, and to compare analyses across transcripts. Intensive analysis involved moving between the data and the interpretations within the same transcript and across different transcripts. Eventually a common pattern of responses across the 14 interviews with regard to the stability of perspective transformation and continued meaning-making was identified.

Findings

Two major findings emerged from the data. First, the perspective transformation proved irreversible. People continued to make meaningful contributions, appreciate their lives and the lives of others. Second, there were changes in meaning schemes, which included the adoption of a future-oriented perspective to life, greater attention to issues pertaining to care of the self, and integration of one's HIV-positive status into self-definition.

Irreversibility of the Perspective Transformation

Maintenance of the perspective transformation was evidenced in the three ways described below.

Opportunity to make a meaningful contribution. In the first study, the new perspective was evidenced by the participants' belief that their HIV-positive status served as an opportunity to make a meaningful contribution. Infection with HIV facilitated use of their lives in a purposeful way. Two years ago, Steve, then 39, noted, "I'm real grateful to be here . . . I think there's a reason and I don't really have to know what the reason is. I have a hunch that if there's, you know if anything can come from this to help anybody else, that's reason [enough]."

During the second interviews, it was evident that respondents retained the desire to make a meaningful contribution. Steve, for instance, said he was pleased to "be able to be on this planet and have an impact" whether it meant helping friends or family.

A continued heightened sensitivity to life. When respondents were interviewed two years ago, they expressed gratitude for their lives and evidenced a newfound appreciation for nature and people. Sam, who works as a handyman, described his life as "heavenly" and said, "I feel like I'm on the verge of crying tears of gratitude." Dawn commented on "how fragile life is," and Tracy concluded that she had previously taken life and people for granted.

In the second interviews, the heightened sensitivity to life was shown in participants' continued appreciation for their lives, the lives of others, and nature. For example, Joe spoke of his appreciation for life and his surroundings:

I walk outside and it's a beautiful day and I sit there and breathe the air and see the sunshine and I have -- there's sometimes when I can actually have tears in my eyes because it's so beautiful, just because I know I get to be alive another day and experience it. And, I just know that I have so many friends now that aren't here to do that. So I have a great appreciation for living.

A continued need to be of service to others. The importance of the participants' relationships with others drove their need to be of service. During the first interviews, most worked for or volunteered at AIDS service organizations (ASOs), and engaged in activities such as peer counseling or educational speaking. Steve's eloquent quote captured his desire to help:

I just want to hold a candle to where maybe somebody two steps behind me can make it to that point and then perhaps go a couple

more steps if I can't go. I just feel like we're all helping each other walk through this.

The strong desire to be of service to others continued to be apparent in the second interviews. Many were still working or volunteering at ASOs, serving in a variety of roles. Pat, diagnosed HIV-positive over 12 years ago, discussed her continued service to others by saying:

I volunteer for Outreach . . . I sit on a board . . . I'm a patient advocate for [a local AIDS group] . . . I sponsor a lot of women in . . . in recovery that are struggling to stay clean, but the ones that have HIV, you know, I work with their minds and try to keep them on a . . . positive plane about the disease.

Interestingly, it was in discussing their service to others that the participants recognized the irreversibility of their perspective transformation. When Joe rekindled his interest in a comic book collection because he realized that he would continue to live, he recognized how his worldview had changed:

And it was like, "Oh cool, you know, I'm gonna be around another 20 years to enjoy this maybe." So, uh, I did go through a short time where I was buying things and felt kind of materialistic but it didn't last. You know, it was like, I hadn't forgotten all the lessons I'd learned -- I was kind of indulging in it for a little while, just to get that feeling back I used to have. But I'd changed too much Ultimately, I realized these are just things. If I'm collecting it to have just number 1 through 20 or something, you know, why am I doing it? It didn't have the same meaning anymore as that, it was one of those unimportant things, ultimately.

Changes in Meaning Schemes

Over time, the participants in this study evidenced changes in their meaning schemes in the following three ways.

Adoption of a future-oriented perspective. When last interviewed, the focus of the participants in this study was on living in the present. Many eloquently spoke of the "uncertainties of tomorrow" and how "living for today" provided the freedom to do what they felt was really important in life. Dawn, for instance, said that she had "watched people all my life around me who 'someday they're gonna do this and someday they're gonna do that' and I try really hard to make my someday today."

In the follow-up interviews, participants spoke of this new perspective in various ways, including having a "positive outlook," "making long-range plans," and "looking forward" to benchmark events in life, such as a 30th birthday or retirement. Nicole, one of the youngest participants in the study, said simply and frankly, "I'm not thinking I'm going to die any time soon." In no

longer believing that her life would be cut short by HIV, Tracy stated that she will now "make plans . . . I set goals, things that I would like to do."

The thrill that the hope for a future brings, however, is not without its own trepidation and challenge. Jeffrey was quick to note that the prospect of living is precipitating the "same kind of metamorphosis that I have gone through" in others and that they are "having the same struggles":

Do I put my energy into living or do I still be safe and keep all the safeguards that I have? Do I go out and get the mortgage or do I just stay . . . These life choices are scary and yet we never thought we'd have to deal with them.

Greater attention to care of the self. During the first round of interviews the participants reported that the meaning they had made of their HIV status centered largely on being of service to others. Although serving others has continued to be a hallmark in the lives of all the participants in this study, data from the second interviews reveal that they evidence an awareness of the need to care for themselves as well -- an awareness rarely articulated two years ago. For some, like Dawn, caring for others had often been in lieu of caring for herself, not in conjunction with it. She explained it like this:

Over the years, I've had the privilege of meeting . . . tens of thousands of HIV-positive people . . . I started running back into them [laughter] and, you know, they say, "You were such an inspiration" . . . I shamefully stand there and say to myself I haven't done any of those things. "That was good advice. I'm glad you took it." It's time for me to do that too.

Elise likewise observed that in addition to that "blessed feeling of being of service to other people," there "always has to be a part of me that's taking care of me. Otherwise, I'm of no service to anyone else.

Integration of HIV-positive status into self-definition. There was also a notable difference in the centrality of HIV in the lives of the participants in the second interviews. Most, two years earlier, had defined themselves primarily in terms of their HIV status. In the intervening two-year period, however, the prominence of HIV in their lives had receded. Elise, for instance, noted that "I'm more integrated with HIV. It's . . . as opposed to being as big as I am, it's just a part of who I am now." Sam similarly remarked that, "It [HIV] is just a part of me now."

Discussion

Our study provides empirical evidence that perspective transformations are irreversible, confirming the thinking of Mezirow (1991) and Kegan (1994). However, the perspective transformations of our participants were triggered by the highly emotional and traumatic impact of a life-threatening diagnosis. We wonder about the staying power of perspective transformations that emerge from non-life-threatening events and encourage subsequent research in this area as a means of illuminating our understanding of the key ingredients of an enduring perspective transformation.

The second major finding of this study confirmed the expectation that, over time, meaning schemes change. Our sample reported changes in perspectives about the future, self, and HIV. What the data do not reflect are subsequent perspective transformations.

This finding is explained by Mezirow's (1990b) distinction between meaning schemes and meaning perspectives. The former represent the specific beliefs and assumptions of individuals that constitute the rules for interpretation. Meaning perspectives provide the framework or structure for meaning schemes and serve to assimilate and transform experiences. A perspective transformation is the result of a change in meaning perspectives; it is the consequence of critically examining our meaning schemes, of asking the why question. Unlike the HIV-positive diagnosis which was the disorienting dilemma (Mezirow, 1990b) that raised such basic questions as, "Why am I still alive?" or "Now, what is my purpose in life?" the events over the past two years have prompted what Mezirow refers to as content reflection (description/facts) of an experience or process reflection, the strategies one might employ in

an experience. A different view of the self illustrates this distinction. Two years ago, the adults in this study explained how an HIV-positive diagnosis forced them to come to grips with what was really important in life and what would be their role in life with HIV, and they concluded that they should devote their remaining time helping other people. Thus, they shifted their meaning perspective from self- to other-oriented. The nature of their reflection on those two questions was premise reflection because they were assessing the why of their existence and their future.

Two years later the majority of the sample gave evidence that their thinking had gone from one extreme to a more balanced view -- that concern for the self is equally important to concern for others. By reflecting on their decision to help others and its consequences for their own lives, they realized that they could not effectively serve others if they did not care for themselves as well. Rather than asking the important question about the purpose of life, in the last two years the participants in this study discovered that their strategies (process reflection) for fulfilling their purpose needed adjustment.

Another possible explanation for changes in meaning schemes is time. First, the passage of two years provided an opportunity to reflect further about being HIV-positive. Second, we observed from the data that some of the individuals in this study have entered adult life transition stages in the past two years. Third, the perception by the HIV-positive adults that they have more time to live may have altered their assumptions about their longevity and, consequently, their behavior in regard to future plans.

Implications for Adult Education

On the one hand, the fact that we found perspective transformations hold over time is encouraging to those concerned about transfer and stability of learning. Transformational learning, acknowledged by some as an appropriate goal for adult education (Robertson, 1996), may endure because it effects a dramatic change in the learner. Thus, adult educators who purposefully configure adult learning experiences in order to bring about a perspective transformation have one empirical indicator that learners experiencing perspective transformations are likely to maintain the change.

On the other hand, that a perspective transformation is stable over time reflects serious concerns for the adult educator. Ethical issues as to the right of the adult educator to intentionally plan for perspective transformation as well as the responsibility for the subsequent impact of the perspective transformation in the lives of learners are important to consider. Robertson (1996) provides a helpful observation about this dilemma when he argues that while transformational learning is an appropriate goal for adult education, "the field neither adequately prepares nor supports adult educators to manage the dynamics of helping relationships or the dynamics of transformative learning within the context of those relationships" (pp. 43-44).

The second major finding of this study, that meaning schemes do change over time and in a developmentally positive direction, as indicated by our data, also has implications for adult education. This evidence offers assurances that fundamental beliefs and assumptions of learners are continuously changing; therefore, our efforts to provide learning experiences that help learners examine their meaning schemes may be productive for them. But, that conclusion assumes that changes in meaning schemes are always developmentally positive, as was true for our sample. The findings of this study do not counter that assumption, but neither do they confirm it as a universal experience. Thus, while we have found that alterations in meaning schemes are favorable, they may not change or may change negatively in other situations.

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